

Consumers Union “*Best Buy Drug*” Website and Public Education Campaign Frequently Asked Questions

*Q: What exactly is a **Best Buy Drug**?*

A: A *Best Buy Drug* is one that is in the top tier of effectiveness in its category, has a safety record equal or better than other drugs in the category, and has an average retail price that is at least 25 percent lower than the most costly drug in the category. A *Best Buy Drug* combines high quality medicine with good value for your dollar. *Best Buy Drugs* offer direct savings to people who lack insurance coverage for prescription drugs.

*Q: Why did Consumers Union (CU) initiate the Consumer Reports **Best Buy Drugs** project?*

A: CU initiated the project to fill a gap in the public’s knowledge about the effectiveness and safety of prescription drugs and especially how drugs to treat a given illness or condition stack up against each other. Armed with the information presented here, consumers like you—in consultation with your doctor—will be better able to choose drugs that best suit your medical needs while taking cost into account. The project also gives you another perspective on the comparative value of prescription drugs—a perspective not driven primarily by pharmaceutical industry marketing and advertising that emphasizes newer (and more costly) drugs. In addition, we were powerfully motivated by growing evidence that millions of Americans every day go without needed medications because of their cost. That includes many people with conditions such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease and osteoporosis who actually stop taking medicines because they can not afford to get refills.

Q: What’s on this website?

A: CU has created a series of consumer-friendly reports that examine and compare prescription drugs by category. For example, we look at drugs to treat high cholesterol, arthritis pain, heartburn and ulcers. Over time, we will examine the medicines in some 24 categories, including those to treat allergies, diabetes, infections, pain and depression. By early 2006, this site will cover most of the most commonly used prescription medicines in the U.S. today. Drug categories will be added at the rate of about one per month after the initial launch. Drawing on an authoritative review of scientific studies, each report discusses and compares

the effectiveness and safety of individual drugs. In each drug category that is warranted, we pick a *Best Buy Drug* or several *Best Buy Drugs* based on their effectiveness, safety track record and price.

Q: How should I use the information?

A: It is not the aim of this project or website to replace the judgment of doctors in choosing the right drug for you. We urge you to discuss the information presented on this website with your doctor. You can print out the reports and simply take them to your doctor. You may also want to discuss them with a pharmacist or other health care provider. This should spark a dialogue about which drug is best for you and how much the drug will cost you. Studies show that doctors don't typically take price into account when prescribing medicines, even for people who have no insurance coverage. We hope the information here will lead to an open discussion of price since the evidence shows that many lower cost drugs can be just as effective as more expensive options.

Q: What if I have health insurance or a Medigap policy (for seniors) that pays for drugs? Is the information here still useful?

A: Yes. First off, you will learn about which drugs have been judged to be the most effective and safe. So regardless of price, you could learn that you are taking (or have been prescribed) a less effective drug or one which has raised safety concerns. Secondly, you may be guided to drugs that are as effective or more effective than the one you are taking and which have a lower co-pay through your insurance plan. That is often the case these days with generic drugs, for example. You can learn here how the generic alternative in the category of medicine you need stacks up against newer brand name drugs. In addition, choosing high quality, lower cost prescription (and sometimes non-prescription) medicines can help reduce health care costs overall for your employer, your health insurer, and you. The benefit to you will accrue because your insurance premiums may not increase as much over time. With health costs soaring today, this is a role you can play to constrain costs while still availing yourself of the highest quality treatment.

Q: What if I am on Medicare, can I still benefit from this information?

A: Yes. Many Medicare beneficiaries struggle to pay for prescription drugs because they do not have any drug insurance coverage. In 2003, Congress enacted

legislation that will provide some drug coverage beginning in 2006. In the meantime, Medicare-authorized prescription drug discount cards can help lower the cost of your medicines. In addition, a \$600-a-year subsidy is available in 2004 and 2005 to low-income beneficiaries. Check the Medicare website to find out about these programs. The information on our website can help guide seniors to high quality low cost medicines that will give them better value for their dollar. As such it can supplement your other efforts to save money on the drugs you need. For example, you may discover here a lower cost alternative drug to the one you are taking or have been prescribed. You may still be able to get a discount on that medicine from Medicare, from your state or from a pharmaceutical company. Even when the Medicare drug benefit starts up in 2006, this site will help guide you to the drugs that are most effective, safe and the best value. Seniors and people with disabilities will still need to shop carefully for their drugs even after that benefit begins because it does not cover the full cost of drugs.

*Q: Who can most benefit from the information provided by Consumer Reports **Best Buy Drugs**?*

A: CU's information will be most helpful to people who do not have any prescription drug insurance or health insurance at all. That includes some 11 million seniors and disabled people enrolled in Medicare, 45 million people under age 65 who have no insurance on any give day in the U.S. and another 15 to 18 million people who have health insurance with no drug coverage. It could also be especially helpful to millions more people who have limited drug coverage since they are at risk for higher out of-pocket costs.

*Q: What evidence is behind the Consumer Reports **Best Buy Drug** evaluations and the **Best Buy Drugs** picks?*

A: The medical findings in the drug reports are based primarily on a series of comprehensive and independent reviews of the scientific literature and evidence on the effectiveness and safety of drugs in specific classes, such as drugs that treat high blood pressure, heartburn or high cholesterol. These reviews were conducted by teams of physicians and researchers at the Oregon Health & Science University Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) as part of the Drug Effectiveness Review Project (DERP). DERP is a first-of-its-kind, 12-state initiative to evaluate the comparative effectiveness and safety of prescription drugs. The Oregon EPC

research team has no financial interest in any pharmaceutical company or product. They have presented their findings in a series of highly regarded technical reports. These are available here. A member of the Oregon research team, Dr. Mark Helfand, served as consultant to the Consumer Reports *Best Buy Drugs* Project. His role was to explain the medical evidence from the DERP reports that related to CU's criteria for effectiveness and safety. We obtained drug prices from a healthcare information company that tracks the sales of prescription drugs in the U.S.

Q: So what prices are used? Do they reflect the price I will pay?

A: As you may know, prices for the same medicine can vary quite widely, even within a single city or town. And prices can change over time. The drug prices CU cites and used to make the *Best Buy* picks are those paid by consumers in retail pharmacies who pay cash for their medicines. The prices reflect the nationwide average retail price paid for a medicine at the pharmacy. Being an average, the prices CU cites may be more or less than what you might pay for the same drug. They also could be more or less than the price paid by your health plan, of which you will pay a "co-pay" portion. That said, if you are paying significantly more than the average price we cite, you may want to check other places you could buy the drug and talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the dilemma. The prices CU cites do not include any adjustments for discounts negotiated by health insurers, employers or companies that manage pharmacy benefits for insurers or employers. They also do reflect any rebates that employer, insurers or pharmacy benefit managers may get from pharmaceutical companies to preferentially use their drugs.

*Q: Could the analysis and **Best Buy** picks change over time?*

A: Yes. The *Best Buy* picks could change over time as new scientific evidence emerges and/or as drug prices change. Also, new generic drugs may become available in a given category as brand drugs lose their patent protection. Consumer Reports *Best Buy Drugs* staff will monitor such developments and drug prices monthly and make changes as often as warranted. CU will rely primarily on DERP's ongoing monitoring of drug effectiveness research and safety studies for updates. DERP now updates its reviews annually. If rare events occur, such as the recent withdrawal from the market of the arthritis drug Vioxx, CU will update the relevant report or reports.

Q: Can I use the information provided on this website to buy drugs online?

A: Yes, once you and your doctor choose the drug that's best for you, you can shop for it anywhere to try and get the best price. You may well be able to beat the price we cite by shopping online, where drugs are usually less expensive. If your doctor and you settle on the choice of several medicines that CU rates as effective and safe (including or other than our *Best Buy* picks) you may indeed want to shop online to see which one is the least expensive. Be careful to use only reputable online websites.

Q: Can I use the information provided on this website to buy drugs from Canada?

A: Although CU supports legislation for the re-importation of drugs from Canada, it is still technically illegal to buy drugs from Canada or other foreign countries. This website will not help you buy prescriptions online from Canada. It is designed primarily to help you find lower cost prescription drug alternatives that are available in the United States. But if you choose to shop abroad for the medicines we identify as most effective and cost effective, that could save you more money.

*Q: What if my doctor or pharmacist rejects your recommendations or **Best Buy** picks?*

A: It is possible that your doctor will not accept the information that CU provides, but CU anticipates that this will be uncommon. CU expects most doctors will welcome the scientific information in the reports you find here. However, there may well be clinical reasons why your doctor selects a particular drug for you. The important thing is to open a dialogue with your doctor about why he or she is choosing a particular drug for you. If your doctor rejects the scientifically based information CU presents, it is reasonable for you to expect an adequate explanation.

Q: What is a generic drug? Are they just as good?

A: A generic drug is a copy of a brand name drug—using the same active ingredients that work in the same way in the body. Generic drugs come in the same dosages as brand name drugs, and they have the same risks and benefits as their brand-name counterparts. The FDA holds both brand-name and generic drug

facilities to the same high standards of good manufacturing processes. Generic drugs become available when a brand drug loses its patent protection. Generic drugs make up about 47 percent of all prescriptions. They can be viewed as “tried and true” and tested by time. However, in some cases (and not as often as is commonly believed) newer brand name drugs have fewer side effects or are more effective. Generic drugs are almost always less expensive than the brand they replace and than other competing brand drugs.